

T. F. Torrance (1913-2007): A Life¹

Tony Clark

ABSTRACT Key Words: T. F. Torrance, Michael Polanyi, Karl Barth and Church of Scotland.

This brief reflection remembers the life of T. F. Torrance, theologian and churchman, and some of the ways in which he was influenced by Michael Polanyi.



The Christian theologian Thomas Forsyth Torrance died in Edinburgh on 2 December 2007. Torrance was born in Chengdu, Szechwan, China on 30 August 1913. He married Margaret Spear in 1946 and they had two sons and one daughter. Torrance, who was ordained a minister in the Church of Scotland in 1940, was Professor of Church History, New College, Edinburgh University 1950-52, and then Professor of Christian Dogmatics from 1952-79.

T. F. Torrance was undoubtedly one of the foremost theologians of the second half of the 20th century and perhaps the greatest Reformed theologian since Karl Barth. After his long service as a Professor at New College he remained active as a scholar, continuing to publish for two decades after his retirement. Born to a missionary family in China, Torrance was deeply devoted to the church. Early in his career he served as a parish minister in the Church of Scotland and in 1976 was elected for a term as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Torrance's ecclesial concerns were ecumenical. He played a substantial role in the dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox and Reformed Churches and had the unusual distinction, for a Presbyterian minister, of being made a Protopresbyter of the Greek Orthodox Church by the Patriarch of Alexandria in 1973.

Torrance's academic career was marked by a prolific scholarly output including over two hundred books, articles and reviews reflecting a remarkable range of interests and understanding. Together with J. K. S. Reid he was responsible for the founding of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* and he was also involved in editing the translation of Calvin's New Testament commentaries.

As a postgraduate student Torrance studied with Karl Barth in Basel for two semesters. This experience made an immense impact upon him and he became one of the leading disciples of the Swiss theologian and was instrumental in the reception of Barth's work in Scotland. His advocacy of Barth was extended to the whole of the English-speaking world through his co-editing of the English translation of Barth's multi-volumed *Church Dogmatics*.

Torrance's own writings reflect the influence of Barth's theology in numerous ways, but his reading of Barth was by no means uncritical. Torrance's academic career was flourishing in the turbulent years of the 1960s. At this time there was, in theological circles, a deep concern to reinterpret Christian theology in the light of contemporary interests and convictions. Barth's contribution, at this point, was to call theologians and the church to root theological understanding not in any transitory *Zeitgeist* but in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The merit of this approach, to which Torrance was so strongly drawn, was that it sought to ground theology in its own proper and distinctive source. However, a problem which accompanied this strategy, as it

was adopted by Barth, was a disturbing fissure between theology and the culture within which it was expressed. It was this problem that prompted Torrance to develop Barth's theology in new directions. Torrance's contribution, in this respect, was to bring theology into conversation with the natural sciences, and thereby establish a connection with a key aspect of contemporary culture.

At this point we must acknowledge the significance of the work of Michael Polanyi for Torrance's work. Relatively early in his academic career Torrance was impressed by Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, which he read soon after its publication in 1958. On the strength of this he invited Polanyi to give some lectures in New College. It was at that time a friendship between Torrance and Polanyi began.² This friendship continued to the end of Polanyi's life at which point Torrance became Polanyi's literary executor.

The degree to which Torrance was able to draw upon Polanyi's thought is demonstrated in many of his publications after this time. Alistair McGrath is no doubt right to point out that Torrance's use of Polanyi was "a means of developing and strengthening his own fundamental theological ideas, and it is emphatic that those ideas are not *grounded* in Polanyi's writings."³ Nevertheless his engagement with Polanyi was both considerable and sustained. Torrance's seminal work *Theological Science*, published in 1969⁴, was largely based on lectures which he had given at Union Theological Seminary in 1959 and yet the references to Polanyi are numerous. That Torrance could establish such an extensive engagement with Polanyi's work on a theme at the heart of his own theological concerns so soon after reading *Personal Knowledge* is evidence enough of fertile common ground between the two thinkers.

Torrance was aware that Polanyi was not primarily concerned with theology and religion. He wrote, "It was evidently not Polanyi's main intention, in reconstructing the scientific basis of man's knowledge of the universe, to make room for religious faith or knowledge of God."⁵ Torrance believed that they were, nevertheless, "a by-product of his argumentation."⁶ One of the things that attracted Torrance was Polanyi's articulation of the relationship between faith and reason and his acknowledgement of the necessary role of "faith" in science. Torrance was impressed that, in the context of a discussion about scientific knowledge, Polanyi would adopt the "Augustinian" statement: "Unless you believe, you will not understand" – even though, as a patristic scholar, he could not resist pointing out that the phrase actually comes from Clement of Alexandria!⁷

Torrance shared with Polanyi a desire to question the distortions of philosophy as it had developed in the modern period. They both sought to confront the various forms of objectivism which deny – or, at least, offer an entirely inadequate account – of the place of the person in human knowledge while refusing to reduce human knowledge to subjectivity. It is in and through our participation, or indwelling, in the things about which we seek to understand that our theoretical knowledge arises. In the case of Polanyi the principal focus is the reality of the natural world while for Torrance it is the reality of the revelation of God in Christ. In both cases, it is the antecedent reality which represents the external pole, or anchor, of our knowledge, and it is the very *being* of such realities which can call into question the knowledge we claim. Reality, as Polanyi was fond of saying, retains the potential to reveal itself to us in new and unexpected ways. Torrance clearly shared Polanyi's post-critical realism.⁸

In the light of this it is apparent that Torrance's engagement with the natural sciences was not a betrayal of Barth's theological method. He did not attempt to prescribe a theological method based on the methodology of the natural sciences. Rather, as a thinker with critically realistic convictions in both the natural

sciences and theology, he sought to show that, in both spheres, the method of enquiry must be determined by its object. Torrance wrote that “Science, to be science, operates with something irreducibly given, over which we have no control.”⁹ So theology, to be theology, must contend with its authentic and unique source most fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. In this he shows himself to be a faithful disciple of his mentor. Indeed, Torrance’s theology may be regarded as both an extension and a corrective of Barth’s most profound insights.

T. F. Torrance was a scholar of remarkable learning and churchman of profound, orthodox, trinitarian faith. His contribution was great and his legacy to the church and to theology is a rich one.

Endnotes

¹ In writing this obituary I have borrowed biographical information found in the obituaries for T. F. Torrance published by *The Times* on December 11th 2007 and *The Independent* on December 7th 2007.

² See T. F. Torrance, “Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith – A Personal Report,” *TAD* 27:2 (2000-01):29.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 233. McGrath’s emphasis.

⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969).

⁵ T. F. Torrance (ed.) *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: The Handsell Press, 1980), xvi.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See T. F. Torrance, “Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith – A Personal Report,” *TAD* 27:2 (2000-01):27.

⁸ Whether Polanyi shared Torrance’s realist view of God is a debated point. What is clear is that the contours of Torrance’s critically realistic theology parallel those of Polanyi’s general epistemological insights.

⁹ T. F. Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Belfast and Ottawa, Christian Journals Limited, 1984), 108.

Remembering Doug Adams

Allen Dyer and Phil Mullins

ABSTRACT Key Words: Doug Adams, Christianity and the arts, Michael Polanyi.

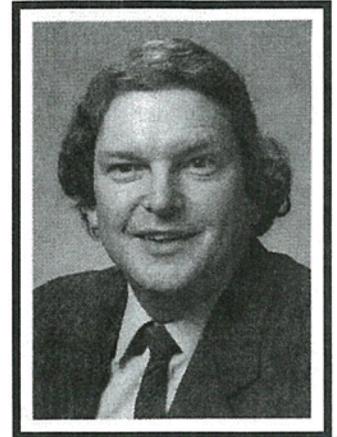
These brief reflections remember the late Doug Adams, Professor of Christianity and the Arts at Pacific School of Religion and Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley.

Doug Adams died July 24, 2007. Throughout his life, Doug was a spiritual presence and his enthusiasm will live on in the memories of those who knew him. He embodied the joy of life. He knew what to take seriously – and also what not to take seriously. He mocked pretense, but he understood it. He was a quick thinker, a ready wit, a kind teacher, and a wonderful friend.

Adams was an undergraduate at Duke University and he was a student there in the spring semester of 1964 when Polanyi was James B. Duke Distinguished Professor in the Department of Religion. Polanyi gave five public lectures at Duke as well as a lecture in the Divinity School; he addressed several other audiences and Doug, as well as a number of other Duke students working with Bill Poteat, were indelibly marked by Polanyi's presence that spring at Duke. Doug much later approvingly reported to Polanyi biographer Bill Scott that Polanyi was willing "to talk with students, treating them with attention and respect."¹ He told Scott intriguing stories about how Polanyi was fascinated with the then new frisbee that students were tossing, and about how he had an opportunity to pose to Polanyi his then pressing questions (to which Polanyi responded) about his interest in the Pauline scheme and about possible links between Polanyi's and Wittgenstein's thought.

After graduating from Duke, Adams went to seminary at Pacific School of Religion, where he studied more Polanyi with Charles McCoy; he completed his Th.D. in theology and art at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, where he worked with John and Jane Dillenberger. After short stints teaching at the University of Montana and as a post-doctoral Smithsonian Fellow in American art at the National Museum of American Art in Washington D. C., Doug took a position at Pacific School of Religion. He taught there and at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley (where he at one point chaired the doctoral faculty in art and religion) for thirty years.

Early in his career, he joined the Polanyi Society and, for many years, before the Polanyi Society Board of Directors was reorganized, Doug was the coordinator for art studies. His appreciation and writing about art was always informed by his early apprenticeship with the philosophical thought of Michael Polanyi.² He wrote six books and was an editor for seventeen other books; he wrote about painting, sculpture, dance and worship. Doug was a leader in organizations fostering interest in religion and arts. He served as president of The Sacred Dance Guild and the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture, and was founding director of the Center for the Arts, Religion and Education at PSR/GTU. He inspired philanthropy. He saw so many things that needed doing, and imagined ways they could be done.



Adams was a role model for his divinity and doctoral students and friends. Walking through a museum with him was an experience to remember. Modern art was demystified, and sacred art was made reverent and relevant. He appreciated the creative process and it became part of the experience shared with him. Anyone who attended one of Doug's classes or public lectures (sometimes in costume) quickly recognized that he was a performer who always magically charmed his audience. He was a gifted teacher who won the Sarlo Excellence in Teaching Award at the Graduate Theological Union. Although he was enormously creative and productive, his office was famously a mess with barely a path from door to desk. But there was a map to help him find things that he might later need. Doug appreciated the finer things in life, and that included good wine, and what it could do to a person and to an occasion. Many a lecture at PSR/GTU was a festive event with appropriate libations to lessen inhibitions and add to the enjoyment. Joy crept into everything he did.

As those who attended the 1991 Kent State Polanyi conference will remember, Doug often was full of surprises. He was a member of a panel convened late in the afternoon. Though he had prepared remarks carefully, he recognized it was unlikely his comments would overcome the lethargy that had set in after a rich, long day. At the appointed time, he stepped to the front of the stage and hurled his paper stack of prepared handouts toward the audience and they drifted down like leaves. The audience was suddenly jolted into a state of alertness.

Doug Adams' students and friends will miss his enthusiasm, his devoted personal attention, and his generosity of spirit.

Endnotes

¹ William Tausig Scott and Martin X. Moleskiki, S. J., *Michael Polanyi Scientist and Philosopher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 255.

² See, for example, Doug Adams and Phil Mullins, "Meaning with the Arts: The Implications of Polanyi's Epistemology for the Arts," *Studia Mystica*, I, 2 (Summer 1978): 28-48 or Doug Adams, *Transcendence with the Human Body in Art: Segal, De Staebler, Johns, and Christo* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). The latter was reviewed in *Tradition and Discovery*, 23:2 (1996-97): 37-39.

Electronic Discussion List

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group that explores implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can join. To join yourself, go to the following address: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join. If you have difficulty, send an e-mail to Doug Masini (masini@etsu.edu) and someone will see that you are added to the list.